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ABSTRACT

School psychologists are trained to work with a wide variety of students and school personnel. Unfortunately, their role has often been narrowly defined by legal issues and by administrators and teachers who do not understand the potential of school psychologists. This study investigated whether teachers are currently turning to school psychologists for aid, how often they are doing so, and in what capacity. By learning what it is that teachers want from them, school psychologists can better fulfill the roles most needed by educators. Results indicate teachers feel comfortable working with school psychologists and believe they could gain good suggestions regarding teaching practices from them. However, the number of interactions reported was small, likely due to the limited availability of psychologists in the schools and the fact that many teachers do not believe services outside of assessment are a part of the psychologist's job. Implications of these findings for school psychologists and educational reform are discussed, as well as types of information and interventions in which teachers seem most interested. (Author)

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Teachers' Perceptions of School Psychologists' Existing and Potential Roles

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Abstract

School psychologists are trained to work with a wide variety of students and school personnel. Unfortunately, the roles of school psychologists have often been narrowly defined due to legal issues and administrators and teachers who do not understand the potential of school psychologists. The purpose of the current study was to determine if teachers are currently turning to school psychologists for aid, how often they are doing so, and in what capacity. By learning what it is that teachers want from them, school psychologists can better fulfill the roles most needed by educators. Results of the current study indicated teachers feel comfortable working with school psychologists and believed they could gain good suggestions regarding teaching practices from them. However, the number of interactions was small, likely due to the limited availability of psychologists in the schools and due to the fact that many teachers do not believe services outside of assessment are a part of the psychologist's job. Implications of these findings for school psychologists and educational reform will be discussed, as well as types of information and interventions in which teachers seem most interested.

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Introduction

Numerous factors affect children and their learning, including learning disabilities, emotional handicaps, and parental involvement in the educational process. The impact of these and related concerns are being felt by an educational system whose job is being challenged to expand its scope and account for a wide range of students. Yet many school personnel do not receive sufficient training required to work with students facing such obstacles.

School psychologists, on the other hand, are trained to work with a wide variety of student problems and to provide a range of services to school personnel involved in their educational experiences. Fagan and Wise (1994) list the six areas of competency suggested by the NASP (National Association of School Psychologists) standards. If upholding the standards of NASP, school psychologists should receive training in the following domains: psychological foundations (e.g., biological bases of behavior, child and adolescent development), educational foundations (e.g., education of exceptional learners, organization and operation of schools), assessment, direct and indirect interventions (e.g., consultation, counseling), statistics and research design, and professional school psychology (e.g., history, ethical standards). Despite the diversity of school psychologists' training, their tasks in the schools are often limited or dominated by a particular function, assessment. However, this does not appear to be the preference of most individuals engaged in the profession. The role of school psychologists are often dictated by legal issues (e.g., mandatory testing of students with special needs) and by school administrators who do not understand the training and potential of their school psychologists (Hyman & Kaplinski, 1994).

For many years, school psychology literature has included discussion about role functions of the school psychologist. Articles have been written about desired and actual functioning of school psychologists as seen by themselves (e.g., Smith, 1984), and support personnel and administrators have been questioned about their perceived desire for the expansion of school psychologists' roles (e.g., Cheramie & Sutter, 1993). However, there appears to be a gap in the more recent literature concerning teachers' perceptions of school psychologists' functions and what additional roles they could assume in the schools. Yet, teachers have been identified as a key

component for influencing the expansion of school psychologists' practice (Benson & Hughes, 1985). The purpose of the current study was to determine if teachers are currently turning to school psychologists for aid, how often they are doing so, and in what capacity. By learning what it is that teachers want from them, school psychologists may be better able to fulfill the roles most needed by those involved in the day to day learning experiences of students while at the same time expanding their roles and increasing their job satisfaction.

In order to understand the importance of this study, it is necessary to discuss what is known about school psychologists' roles from various perspectives. As mentioned previously, school psychologists as well as administrators, special education teachers, and classroom teachers have all been questioned about their views. Each of these viewpoints will be discussed in turn.

Many studies have found that school psychologists spend the majority of their time performing assessment activities (e.g., Lacayo, Sherwood, & Morris, 1981), but they would rather be more involved in activities such as intervention-related tasks, consultation, and research (Fisher, Jenkins, & Crumbley, 1986; Levinson, 1990; Roberts & Rust, 1994; Smith, 1984; Smith & Mealy, 1988). For example, Smith (1984) surveyed a nationwide sample of school psychologists about their current activities and what they would prefer their activities to be. Results of 877 completed questionnaires concluded that school psychologists practicing in the public schools spend 54% of their time on assessment activities and 23% of their time devoted to intervention activities such as counseling students, teachers, and parents, and participating in meetings and program development. Nineteen percent of their time was consumed by consultative functions. The remaining 1% of their time was spent on research. However, when the desired functions were examined, it was indicated that school psychologists would like to spend more time on intervention-related activities, consultation, and research and less time on assessment. More specifically, substantial increases in time to enable additional counseling activities were desired. In a follow-up study, Smith and Mealy (1988) found that significant changes in time allotted to assessment and intervention activities had occurred with less time spent on assessment and more to

intervention. However, practitioners still expressed a desire for role alteration including less time involved in assessment and more time allocated to intervention, consultation, and research.

In considering how the role of the school psychologist is likely to change, a study of how the roles are perceived by support staff including administrators and special education directors is important. Hartshorne & Johnson (1985) investigated the roles of school psychologists as perceived by secondary school administrators. The administrators were asked to rank order a number of functions in terms of actual time spent and ideal time to spend. Once again, psychological testing was seen as the school psychologists' primary area of responsibility. Only in two areas did the rank order differ between actual time spent and what was considered ideal. Counseling was ranked second when ideal time spent was considered and fifth in actual time spent. Staffings were indicated as the second primary use of psychologists' time while in ideal situations it would be the fifth. Special education directors also reported similar views when questioned. Cheramie and Sutter (1993) surveyed 80 special education directors and reported that although no single activity utilized the majority of their psychologists' time, assessment and consultation were the most common functions. The services desired more by these directors were counseling followed by consultation.

Several studies have examined the differences in roles as perceived by school staff or consumers (i.e., teachers and principals) and school psychologists. From an historical perspective, Roberts (1970) investigated the actual and desired roles of school psychologists as perceived by both psychologists and teachers. This study reported that the psychometric role was seen as the most important function by both school psychologists and teachers; however, to varying degrees. The psychologists felt they could spend less time in this role, whereas teachers not only felt the role was important but that more time could be spent in its activities. In addition, the teachers felt the psychologists should be more involved with activities associated with therapy or counseling more so than did the psychologists. Between the two groups of respondents there was also considerable disagreement with time spent suggesting that teachers might have erroneous perceptions of school psychologists' duties. A more recent study also examined the differences in

perception of time allocation and changes desired (Abel & Burke, 1985). The consumers surveyed indicated the evaluation, diagnosis, and report writing activities of school psychologists should remain their most important responsibility. However, they did underestimate the amount of time psychologists actually spend in this role. Furthermore, the teachers and principals advocated hiring additional psychologists to enable more consultation and direct intervention.

Recent literature involving teachers' perspectives is limited. Gilmore and Chandy (1973) conducted structured interviews with 34 teachers from two elementary schools. From the teachers' perspectives, testing was the primary work conducted by school psychologists. In addition, differences were found between the perceptions of experienced teachers as opposed to moderately experienced and inexperienced teachers. Those teachers with greater experience expected the psychologists to actually conduct treatment instead of simply offering recommendations. When the teachers were asked about how they would like school psychological services to change, 36% of the teachers requested that their school employ a full-time psychologist. The teachers voiced a desire to have consistent and long-term involvement of school psychologists. In addition, they desired more direct involvement between psychologists and teachers and students. This information appears to coincide with the psychologists desire to increase intervention and consultative functions (Fisher, Jenkins, & Crumbley, 1986; Levinson, 1990; Smith, 1984; Smith & Mealy, 1988). Another study examined teachers' perceptions of school psychology services in schools serviced by school psychology interns (Medway, 1977). The teachers' perceptions varied considerably with the actual functioning of the school psychology interns suggesting the teachers were unfamiliar with the roles and functions of school psychologists. In fact, the teachers rated test administration and report writing as the least occurring functions whereas the psychology interns rated these as the most frequently occurring functions. Teacher consultation, diagnostic interviewing, and student counseling were seen by the teachers as the most commonly occurring roles.

Ford and Migles (1979) chose to examine the preferences teachers had for school psychologists' roles. Their research concluded that direct and remedial services which did not

intrude upon the teachers' prerogative were, for the most part, the most important functions. The three most important roles were providing screening services that could facilitate placement of students, conducting psychodiagnostic evaluations, and counseling students. Dean (1980) compared perceptions of preservice teachers and experienced teachers and concluded that both viewed the school psychologist as the appropriate individual to evaluate emotional and learning problems. The school counselor was seen as the appropriate individual to handle student concerns related to family issues. The principal and school psychologist were viewed by the experienced teachers as appropriate referral sources when behavior problems arose while inexperienced teachers felt that was the domain of the school psychologist.

Recent views about the roles and functions of school psychologists as perceived by teachers were not found in the literature. It is this gap in the literature that provides the impetus for the current study. Educators were asked if they are turning to school psychologists for aid, how often they are doing so, and in what capacity. As mentioned, by learning what it is that teachers want from them, school psychologists may be better able to fulfill the roles most needed by those involved in the day to day learning experiences of students while at the same time altering their roles as desired.

Method

Participants

Sixty-four practicing teachers (54 female, 9 male, 1 unspecified) participated in the study. The average age of subjects was 42.82 years with a mean of 16.25 years teaching experience. The majority of teachers were employed in public (n=44), elementary school settings (n=48) as regular education teachers (n=48) in Indiana and Michigan.

Measure

A 40-item instrument was developed for utilization in this study. It consisted of 3 primary sections: a) demographic information, b) existing roles and interactions with school psychologists, and c) degree to which teachers desire information that could prove useful in their teaching. A

variety of question structures were used including likert scale items, ranking choices, open-ended questions, and a yes/no format.

Procedure

Contact teachers distributed and collected questionnaires in their schools. Participation was voluntary and permission was obtained for data collection by each school principal. A cover letter, envelope, and survey were distributed to each teacher. If they chose to complete the survey they could seal it in the envelope and place it in a specified location in the school office. The contact teachers then returned completed surveys to the researchers.

Results

Results of the current study indicated teachers are interacting with school psychologists, with 89% having talked to a school psychologist at some point. However, the number of interactions was small, with 72% having 0-5 professional interactions during a typical school year. Interesting comments from the teachers included: "All we get from the school psychologist are test results;" "We don't work with school psychologists-We just get the results of the tests." Only 1% had had more than 16 interactions.

In terms of roles, 55% of those teachers surveyed felt they had a good understanding of their school psychologists' roles and competencies. By ranking (1=*most helpful*, 4=*least helpful*), the teachers indicated a significant preference for the psychometrician (x=1.87) and problem solver (x=1.87) roles (χ^2 = 45.18, p<.001). Least helpful roles included trainer/educator (x=2.96) and fact finder (x=3.21). Teachers also indicated that different types of report information they received from school psychologists (e.g., IQ scores, achievement scores, recommendations, background information) were equally helpful.

Using a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 signifying *Strongly Disagree* and 5 *Strongly Agree*, the teachers surveyed seemed to feel comfortable working with school psychologists in solving education (x=3.81) and behavioral (x=3.80) problems and they believed psychologists could offer good suggestions regarding teaching practices (x=4.06). However, the results of within subject MANOVAs indicated this was not something they often did (p<.001). Using

another 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 being *Most often asked* and 5 *Least often asked*, teachers were asked who they would turn to for advice if needing help with students with learning disabilities or behavioral handicaps. For learning disabilities, teachers reported they would turn first to *other teachers at the school* (x=1.76) and then to the *assistant principal or principal* (x=3.17) or *school counselor* (x=3.31). All ranked higher than the *school psychologist* (x=3.43), with only a *friend or family member* ranking lower (x=3.91). For behavioral handicaps, teachers reported that they would first turn to *other teachers at the school* (x=2.31). Their next choice was the *school counselor* (x=2.52), *assistant principal or principal* (x=2.69), and then the *school psychologist* (x=3.69), with a *friend or family member* (x=3.74) being the least likely choice. Finally, when asked the order of action they might take when a student's performance was below average in a subject, *talking to a school psychologist to get ideas* was ranked the second to last choice out of 8 (only ahead of *Lower expectation for the difficult task*), indicating again that they are not turning to these professionals (refer to Table 1).

Using a Likert-type scale with 1 signifying *not at all* and 5 *definitely need*, the teachers indicated a desire to obtain more information in a variety of domains (e.g., teaching/managing gifted children). The most desired information included teaching/managing students with emotional difficulties/handicaps (x=4.33) followed by effects of medication on children's classroom performance (x=4.14), teaching/managing students with medical conditions (x=4.02), and teaching/managing students with learning disabilities (x=4.00). Least desired information involved inclusion (refer to Table 2).

Discussion

The question then is, if teachers feel comfortable working with school psychologists and believe they have valuable information, why are teachers not turning to them for aid? A likely answer lies in the availability of psychologists in the schools. Because they are often responsible for a number of schools within their district(s), school psychologists are not present for teachers. As one teacher stated, "Our school psychologist is shared with multiple other districts. It's a miracle when this person is available to use for testing or placement meetings. We need more

psychologists available to us to allow them to work to their optimum without causing them an early death!" Another teacher simply remarked "More time in the building!" when responding to the question: What services would you like your school psychologist to offer you? A reduction in case load was suggested by another teacher to enable school psychologists to engage in roles other than psychometrician. A call for increased numbers of school psychologists is nothing new. In fact, previous researchers have reported this for some time (e.g., Abel & Burke, 1985; Baker, 1965). In order for school psychologists to provide the many services for which they are capable, changes must be made in the educational system which allow for greater interactions with other school personnel. It is only through such reform that the services requested by teachers may be made available.

As suggested in previous research, results of the current study indicated many teachers do not believe services outside of assessment to be part of the school psychologist's job. In answer to the question, *What services does your school psychologist offer you?*, many teachers reported only testing and recommendations. For this reason, it would likely prove helpful for psychologists to inform teachers of their special skills and training so they are aware of the resources school psychologists are able to offer.

In summary, results of this study suggest that a narrow view of school psychologists' services is still held by teachers. Few interactions were indicated yet teachers expressed comfort in working with them. The bottom line, we as professionals need to continue to advocate for expansion of our roles via educational reform and our individual practice.

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Table 1.

Rank order of proposed action taken by teachers when a student's performance was below average in a subject ($p<.001$) (1=best response listed, 8=worst response listed)

Action	Mean
Try a different teaching strategy	2.26
Talk to the student to get his/her perspective	2.37
Demonstrate the difficult task for the student	2.50
Provide additional drill or practice	4.24
Collect information from other teachers	4.44
Talk to the counselor to get ideas	6.07
Talk to the school psychologist to get ideas	6.48
Lower expectations for the difficult task	6.53

Table 2.
Information least and most desired by teachers (1=not at all, 5=definitely need)

Information	Mean
Inclusion	3.23
Suicide prevention	3.30
Alternative evaluation techniques for students	3.30
Teaching/managing gifted children	3.31
Teaching/managing students with neurological impairment	3.38
Teaching/managing students with autism	3.43
Ways to use praise to motivate students	3.44
Teaching/managing students who are mentally impaired	3.48
Behavior modification programs within the classroom	3.52
How to get parents involved in their child's educational experiences	3.59
Teaching/managing students with physical handicaps	3.67
Stress reduction for yourself	3.70
Stress reduction for your students	3.79
Teaching students social skills	3.84
Teaching study skills to students	3.89
Identification of students who need psychological intervention	3.90
Teaching/managing students with learning disabilities	4.00
Teaching/managing students with medical complications	4.02
Effects of different medications on children's classroom performance	4.14
Teaching/managing students with emotional difficulties/handicaps	4.33